

Terrible as the Dawn

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Terrible as the Dawn

by [Riverstories7](#)

Summary

When Alina Starkov awakes, she is a white-haired woman, but her fingers are slim and straight and pencil-calloused. She is still sickly but not so worn. She is no longer in the orphanage but in a dingy tent. Dawn is breaking, and as she always does at sunrise, Alina feels for the familiar contours of her loss, the wound where the light once found a home. That chasm still lives in her mind. But where it lived in her body and soul, there instead resides completion and possibility.

Alina Starkov smiles a triumphant and vicious smile.

Notes

This is my first time posting anything, and I must confess to some terror. But this story just demanded to be written, and re-reading it a week later, I'm rather proud of it. So here it is. Thank you to all who have been writing such wonderful Darklina stories in recent weeks; you've all inspired me.

The standard disclaimer applies: I do not own the Grisha Trilogy or its characters, which belong to Leigh Bardugo. Nor do I have any rights to the Shadow & Bone TV series, developed by Eric Heisserer for Netflix and based on Leigh Bardugo's novels.

When Alina Starkov falls asleep in the orphanage at Keramzin, she is a white-haired old woman, hands gnarled, face lined, body worn by years of caring for children and bearing her own, enduring war and grief and the mundane hardships of rural life. She has been happy. She has been lonely. She has lived with a sense of hollowness for so many years, the invisible chasm where her powers once lived, which has remained a slowly bleeding wound yet grown into an almost-beloved companion. She lives mostly in the past now, less and less in the present. Her breathing is labored as she falls asleep, and she wonders, as always, what memories her dreams will bring.

When Alina Starkov awakes, she is a white-haired woman, but her fingers are slim and straight and pencil-calloused. She is still sickly, but not so worn. She is no longer in the orphanage but in a dingy tent. Dawn is breaking, and as she always does at sunrise, Alina feels for the familiar contours of her loss, the wound where the light once found a home. That chasm still lives in her mind. But where it lived in her body and soul, there instead resides completion and possibility.

Her hands touch her face, finding it unlined. She stands straight, and her eyes fall on her bunk mates, the ragtag team of apprentice cartographers among whom she was once the least promising.

Alina Starkov smiles a triumphant and vicious smile.

When Alina Starkov enters the fold for her second first journey, she has decided that there will be no explosion of light. Instead, as the volcra swarm to the fearful fool's lantern, she grabs her once-husband and leaps overboard. She drags him away from the screams of the dying against his protests, waits until volcra are almost upon her to create a small protective orb.

Alina Starkov and Malyen Oretsev are declared dead with the rest of the crew on that promising new skiff.

A boy and girl emerge dusty in West Ravka, far from any town, and go in search of sea passage.

A year later, the boy and girl return to East Ravka. They have had to cross the fold on foot again, for the rebellions in the west make passage across increasingly rare. The girl wears a curious bracelet of glistening scales, hidden beneath a plain peasant's dress. They buy heavy coats and vanish into the northern forests.

When they emerge, the girl wears a striking necklace of antler, which she hides under high-collared dresses, even in warm weather.

They hear word in the towns they pass through that the king has commanded a large force to cross the Fold, to finally crush the rebellion. The whispers even hold that the Commander of the Second Army will accompany them.

When she first hears this, Alina Starkov smiles another vicious smile.

On the morning those forces amassed in Kribirsk are preparing to cross the Fold, before the sun even rises, two figures creep through the camp, slip unseen past an imposing black tent, and vanish on foot into the wall of shadows.

At dawn, as the soldiers load the skiffs, they are distracted by shouts from the docks. A curious effect of light has appeared over the Unsea. At first, onlookers assume that it is some interaction of cloud and sunrise. But it grows brighter. And quickly the shouts coalesce until every bystander drops their tasks and realizes that light is coming out of the Shadow Fold. Only one figure stands impassive, in a black cloak which seems to swallow all the light around, and watches this curious spectacle.

It begins as a spectacle. But soon the onlookers begin to cry, “A Miracle”!

For pieces of shadow are peeling away, evaporating in the daylight within and without the Fold. Then the sea of darkness parts like a wall of water, shuddering, boiling, vanishing more and more, and in the center stands a white-haired figure, blazing like a star, holding the hands of a supplicant kneeling before her.

Where the floods of darkness roll back, grass grows. Volcra scream in daylight and explode into flocks of bright-eyed black birds. And onlookers across Ravka weep and kneel as the nation’s blight transforms to fertile land.

The task is done, and the two figures walk forward to Kribirsk. One stumbles, singed and coughing. The other strides forward deliberately as if unwearied. She bats any approaching soldiers aside with flares of light, until none stand in her path. As she approaches the city, she is greeted with cries of “Sankta, Sankta!” Her white hair runs loose down her back, a simple white dress revealing her curious necklace and bracelet to onlookers. They reach out to touch her arms, kiss her hem. But her eyes fix on the black-clad figure above the docks and never waver. She walks straight to him and stops. His face is impassive, but she sees rage burn in his charcoal eyes.

“Hello Aleksander,” she murmurs, too low for bystanders to hear. Then they are shrouded in darkness and hidden from curious onlookers.

His hand finds her throat, but she only smiles.

“Who gave you that name?” His voice is low and taut with fury or fear.

“You did. In another life.”

“Who are you?”

“You used to call me your balance.”

“Give me your name.”

She smiles, teasingly. His fingers have loosened. His thumb now caresses her pulse, almost involuntarily.

“Alina Starkov.”

“You are the Sun Summoner.” His fingers now trace her collar.

Her smile becomes mischievous. “Evidently.”

He seems at a loss for a response, so she continues.

“Now, what are we to do since I’ve destroyed your Shadow Fold?”

He steps back and drops his hand, assessing her. And then he smiles, a triumphant and dangerous smile.

“Now, solnichka moya, we rule.”

She smiles in response, just as charged, just as ferocious. He will try to charm her, to wield her again. They will wrestle for control for eternity. But this time, the struggle unfolds on her terms.

Four days later, Os Alta’s gates stand open to welcome its new Sankta. She rides a white horse, clothed in gold and black, her hair falling loose in blinding waves. Next to her, the darkling sits astride his black charger. The crowds cry their greetings and praise. They have heard the tales of Sankta Alina, who burned the fold. The rumors hold that the Darkling trained her in secret, that she is his partner, or his lover, or his wife. Their arrival confirms the tales.

In the throne room of the grand palace, the nobles and guards bow. The Sankta (the people call her Sol Koroleva) and the Darkling do not bow. Instead, Second Army soldiers seize the monarchs and drag them from the throne room. Together, the Starless Saint and his Sun Queen mount the steps and sit on the thrones. The crowd remain on their knees.

Their reign will last lifetimes.

On their deathbeds, the nobles in that throne room will remember the Tsar and Tsaritsa and their burning, terrible smiles.

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